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ABSTRACT

Part of the National Study of American Indian Education, this community background report describes the Tlingit community of Angoon, Alaska. Demographic characteristics and historical background of the community are presented. Religious and economic climates are discussed. Educational development is traced from missionary influence, through Bureau of Indian Affairs' control and establishment of an independent public school district, to the present-day Alaska State School, which is part of the State of Alaska Rural and On-base Public School District. Rapid staff turnover and a standard state curriculum characterize the school. Considerable educational support exists for secondary education not obtainable in the community, which suggests that the harmonizing of traditional and new concepts and practices may have more relevance for the community than reviving native crafts and languages. (JH)

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NATIONAL STUDY OF AMERICAN INDIAN EDUCATION

USOE
PROJECT OEC-0-8-080147-2805

FINAL REPORT

Community Background Reports

Series I

No. 19

Angoon, Alaska

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San Francisco State College
January, 1970

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The attached paper is one of a number which make up the Final Report of the National Study of American Indian Education.

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I. Community Backgrounds of Education in the Communities Which Have Been Studied.

II. The Education of Indians in Urban Centers.

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PREFACE

During May and June, 1969, the members of the San Francisco State College field team spent six weeks studying education in the Tlingit community of Angoon, Alaska.

John Connelly, Director of the Northwest Alaska Region of the National Study of American Indian Education, Ray Barnhardt, Carol Barnhardt, and Charles McEvers comprised the team. John Collier of San Francisco State College served as consultant.

In addition to observations, the members of the team administered questionnaires and interview schedules prepared by the National Study of American Indian Education.

The field team wishes to extend its deep appreciation and thanks to all the residents and officials of Angoon for their cooperation in the study.

John Connelly
Ray Barnhardt

ANGOON

Location and Climate

Angoon is the only village on Admiralty Island, situated south of Juneau on the southeastern coast of Alaska (Map 1). This 1600-square-mile island ranges in elevation from sea level to 7500 feet. Although snow accumulates on the mountains, the climate at sea level is mild and damp. The 400 Tlingit Indians in Angoon share the island with an estimated 1600 Alaskan brown bear and numerous deer and small game.

The village is relatively isolated. The only access to it is by air or water. Although several cars are parked in the village, only four operate with any regularity over the 3 miles of road in and around Angoon. These belong to the postmaster, the store owner, the Alaskan Airlines representative, and the school.

A mail plane arrives 3 times a week and trips to Juneau and Sitka are made by chartered plane, taking about 1 - 1½ hours. There is telephone service and radio communication, but no television. The Coast Guard provides services in emergencies, as when fuel oil shipments are halted by storm pitched Chatham Strait in the wintertime.

Medical services are provided by visiting teams from Sitka. There is one general store. No newspaper is printed here--all newspapers have to be mailed in.

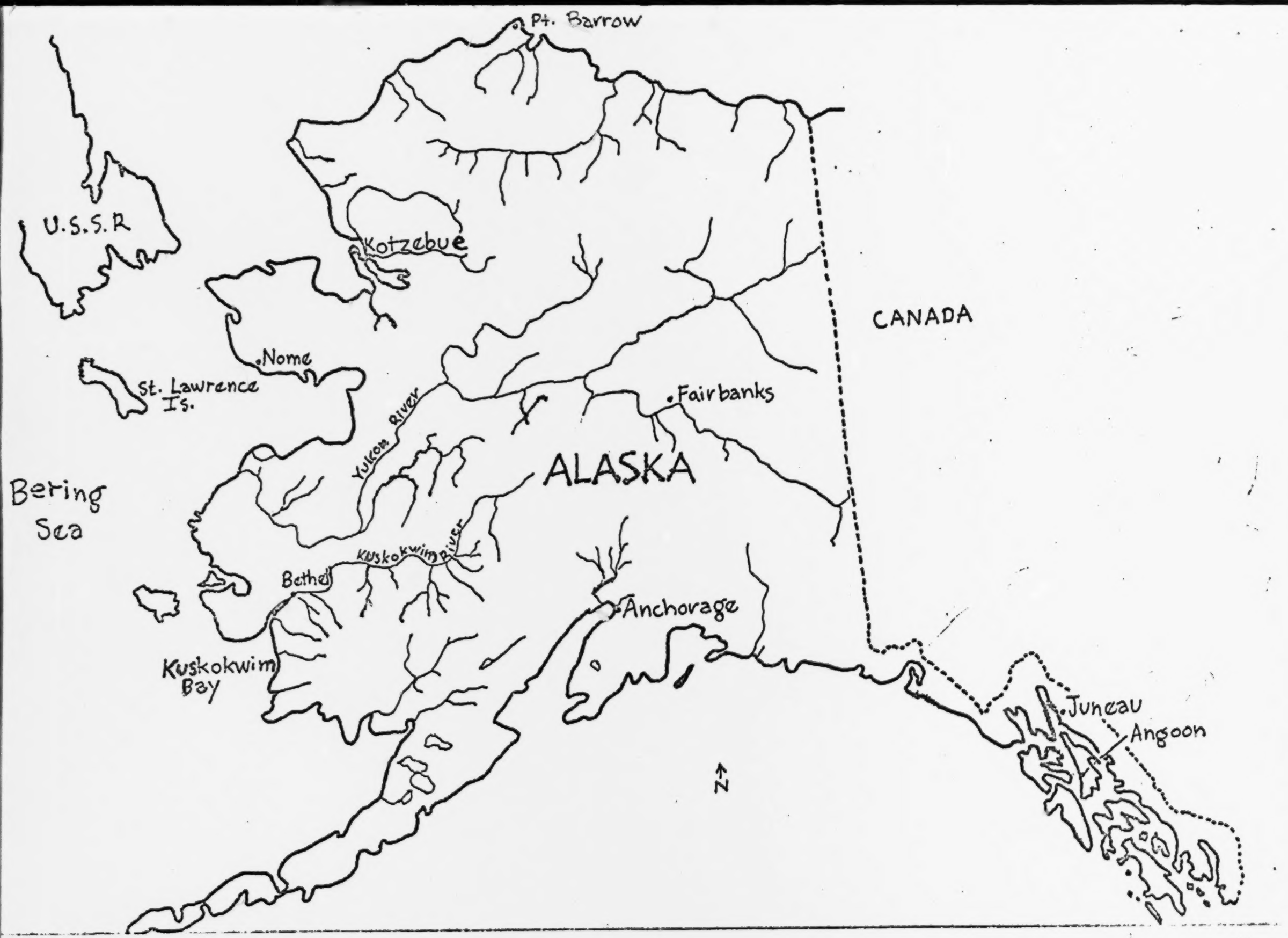
Population

There are about 425 people living in and around Angoon. Almost all are Tlingit. The non-Indian members of the community are the trader and his family, school teachers, and the Pentacostal Holiness Church missionary and his wife.

Angoon is a compact, small island community and people live close together (Map 2). The Tlingit members of the community appear at first rather reserved, but in short time, it is discovered they are quite friendly and more out-going than first impressions indicate. They are not inclined to intrude upon a person but they do not reject a relationship and are quite open in discussion and sharing.

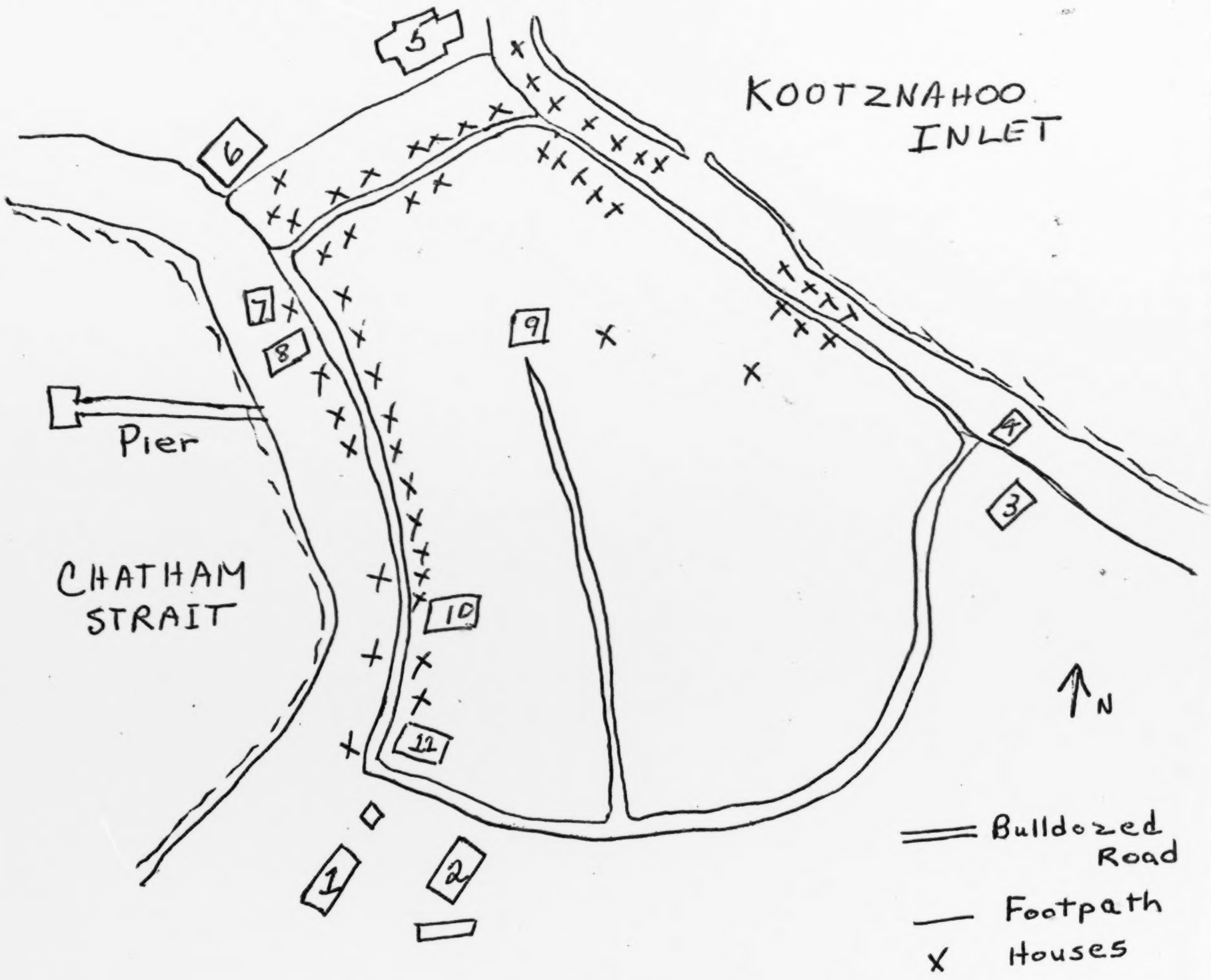
Physical Characteristics

The village is situated in a low area between hills to the north and south. Atop the low hill to the north is the White Russian Orthodox Church


Pt. Barrow
U.S.S.R
Kotzebue
Nome
St. Lawrence Is.
Bering Sea
Yukon River
Fairbanks
CANADA
ALASKA
Kuskokwim River
Bethel
Kuskokwim Bay
Anchorage
Juneau
Angoon
N

MAP 1. ALASKA

MAP 2 ANGOON, ALASKA



1. Site of old Bureau of Indian Affairs School
2. Angoon School, site A (operated by State of Alaska)
3. Angoon School, site B (formerly Public School)
4. Trading Post
5. Greek Orthodox Church
6. Salvation Army Hall
7. Pentacostal Church
8. Old Alaska Native Brotherhood Hall
9. New A.N.B. Hall
10. Presbyterian Church
11. Post Office

and the huge hall of the Alaska Native Brotherhood occupies the south hill. Most of the village houses are along the western side of the island facing Chatham Strait, although the village store, a few houses, and plane float are on the east side of the hill along Kootznahoo Inlet.

Along the western side the frame houses are built close together, lining both sides of the road, those on the outer or beach side being built on piles. The post office, the Presbyterian, Pentacostal and Salvation Army churches are on this street, as is also the old Alaska Native Brotherhood Hall now used for the Head Start Program and various community activities. A boat dock extends out into Chatham Strait.

Across the hill to the south of the A.N.B. Hall, a road has been bulldozed to serve the village school. The school is conducted in tow facilities, one located on the inlet side and the other on the Strait side.

Historical Background

Missionary influence has been important in the adjustments made by the Haida and Tlingit. The Indians of Alaska had minimal attention from a Congress which was less than pleased with the purchase of Alaska in the first place. Indian affairs were placed under first the Army and later the Navy. Indian groups learned early and rapidly that their traditionally effective warfare which had prevented extensive intrusion upon their tribal territories by the Russians and other earlier settlers was no match for the fire power of an armed vessel. There was, however, little or no extension of the law which governed Indian affairs in the rest of the country to native peoples of Alaska. There were no treaties, no reservations provided and no legal definition of Indian status. Military power protected the intrusion of non-Indians, but there was no protection for any Indian claim to possession or use of land. Simply viewed as wards of the government, they were unable in Alaska to even protect themselves by filing mining claims to off-set such claims being filed by non-Indians on their land use areas. As wards they were considered not entitled to the rights possessed by citizens. The fact of the matter was, however, they had never been made wards.

To the Tlingits and Haidas, caught in this predicament, the missionaries appeared as their only allies in survival prospects. The missionary promise of better prospects through education became highly important, and the positive feelings of those days remain strong. Even today graduates of the Presbyterian Sheldon Jackson School at Sitka are foremost among the Indian leaders of Alaska. Employment by cannery owners also became important, allowing the people to adjust the skills they possessed to an opportunity to obtain things that schools had identified as symbols of civilized living.

Mission education while touching upon some areas of traditional life has not touched upon all. The potlatch was disapproved, particularly as it had reference to "ancestor worship," but the kinship system underlying potlatch activities remained untouched.

Religion

There is in Angoon and among the people strong identification with both the church and kin. Traditional Tlingit clan and kinship remain a strong force in individual and group relations and give to Angoon much of the sense of home and security that such affinity promotes. That it was adapted rather than destroyed in the contact period is demonstrated by the giving of the names of deceased kin to children. Churches, on the other hand, provide entry to the non-Indian world under trusted auspices.

Several religious groups are represented today in this small community. They include the Russian Orthodox Church, with a native lay representative; the Presbyterian Church, with a visiting minister; the Salvation Army, with lay leaders; and the Pentecostal Holiness Church, with a missionary couple in residence.

The various services are widely attended by everyone in the community.

Residuals of the traditional religion are built into the kinship system. Rules of exogamy remain very strong.

Economics

There is no regular job employment in Angoon and seasonal or temporary employment provides wage income. Income is derived from fishing, seasonal cannery work at the salmon cannery nearby and from state and federal welfare. During the summer parents and older children work at the cannery.

The seasonal employment often takes the men elsewhere and does not encourage the taking of families. Men may be gone for extended periods of time while their families remain at home in Angoon. Welfare and unemployment payments count considerably in family economics.

Regular and secure employment is viewed as a benefit to come from schooling and is mentioned by parents as the reason they want and encourage their children to stay on in school. This is a view which has been emphasized over a long period of time by missionaries in Southeast Alaska and is a primary emphasis in the Alaska Native Brotherhood, an important and highly influential organization in the lives of the Tlingit and Haida groups of this area.

A Tlingit Indian, with cooperation of Standard Oil of California is going to be supplying fuel oil to Angoon. He will supply the town's two schools and proposed light plant, as well as gasoline and diesel fuel to the fishing boats that ply Chatham Strait. (This is an unusual step for a local Tlingit. He had had special training in the cannery as a corker.)

Government

In 1936, the benefits of the Indian Reorganization Act of 1934 were extended to Alaska. Following this, the Angoon Community Association was incorporated, and its constitution and by-laws were duly ratified November 15, 1939.

The Association is authorized to purchase, own, and manage community property, make contracts, borrow money from the Federal Government for commercial purpose or to lend to individual members. Income can be used for social, educational, and relief purposes.

Powers of the Association are vested in seven elected members. The Secretary of the Interior must approve choice of legal counsel and fees. There is, in addition, an Angoon Village Court, a Village Council, and Village Police Force.

EDUCATION

The Angoon school is State operated, part of the State of Alaska's Rural and On-Base Public School District, serving grades 1-8.

Historical Background

The first school classes held in Angoon, early in this century, were located in any large house that happened to be available. People had to wait each year to see which house would be used. These classes were Mission run. A number of the older residents of the community have also attended Sheldon Jackson Presbyterian Mission School, a boarding school at Sitka, and some the Greek Orthodix Mission School there.

Eventually the governor of Alaska was petitioned for a school and an Alaska Native Service school was built in 1920. In 1929, a new school facility was constructed. Three large and one small classrooms, a superintendent's office, a clinic, storerooms, and quarters for two married couples and a visiting Public Health nurse comprised the plant of this BIA day school.

Following the establishment of local government under the Indian Reorganization Act of 1934 and 1936, and the encouragement of the BIA for Indian schools to become public schools, an independent public school district was set up at Angoon. A new school plant was built, replacing the BIA day school, and it was governed by a local school board elected by the residents.

The new school was built on the side of the island away from the village (Map 2). A road cut through the woods and over the hill led to the school facility, which is still in use. While not old or worn, the building was constructed during the period between the discontinuance of the federal BIA school era and the present state-operated school while Angoon was a local independent school district.

It seemed quite clear why the independent school had been located on the opposite side of the island from the old federal school--the sense of detachment, of independence and of new start, was reflected in the physical move. There was, in addition, the trader's interest in the school. His own children were of elementary school age, and this site was near the store, closer to his home and protected from the cold rain and blow of the strait. Reportedly he had donated the land for the school. His interests, however, and the feelings of the villagers had coincided at the time. Whether a person describing the situation today is friendly to or antagonistic to the trader, the facts in the account are similar, differing only in the emphasis.

By 1950 about 100 children were attending school and some of the 8th grade graduates went on to Mt. Edgecombe, the BIA boarding school at Sitka. Some Angoon children attended Sheldon Jackson at Sitka. A native of Angoon, Walter Sobeloff, a graduate of Sheldon Jackson, is currently (1969) Chairman of the State Board of Education of Alaska.

The Angoon independent public school was unable to maintain itself, however, due to the absence of an adequate tax base. Also, the native residents of Angoon expressed concern that their children might lose schooling opportunity beyond the eighth grade for they could not afford to board their children in Sitka or Juneau for secondary education. For this reason they sought to retain the right to send their children to BIA boarding schools usually Mt. Edgecombe or Chemawa Indian School in Salem, Oregon.

Today Angoon has a new Alaska State School located on the slope just above the old BIA school, its glass and metal modernity smugly observing the decrepitude of its predecessor. The new school has taken over the former public school building on the other side of the island, using it to house the primary classrooms.

The school is part of the State of Alaska Rural and On-Base Public School District. It houses grades 1 - 8. Funds are provided from the State of Alaska, and the Federal Government Johnson O'Malley funds.

Teacher housing has been constructed by the State, adjacent to the new school and is rented out to the teachers.

All of the children who attend live within walking distance. Ninety-five percent of the children are Tlingit Indian. Generally they speak English and also comprehend Tlingit.

Teachers

As in many of the small, isolated rural schools of Alaska there is a rapid turnover of teachers and administrators. The people of the community do not expect that teachers or principals will stay beyond one or two years. At the end of the current year (1968-69) the principal and three of seven teachers would be leaving, meaning a fifty percent new staff for the coming year. Who would come in as replacements would be decided in Juneau or Anchorage. Any briefing of personnel seemed to be minimal and rather general. The individuals sent to staff the school might or might not elect to relate to the local people and the community had an attitude of resigned acceptance. If they chose to interact with the community they would be welcome but if they preferred to stay apart their privacy would be respected. The community was ready and willing but not inclined to take the initiative.

One Tlingit is on the school staff, the sixth grade teacher. The remainder are non-Indian. Two of the teachers are substitutes who have no teacher training.

Curriculum

The curriculum is standard State curriculum. Exceptions to this are found in the first grade which is participating in the Alaska Reading Program developed under the auspices of the Northwest Regional Educational Laboratory, and in the sixth grade where the teacher is Tlingit and brings insights from a Tlingit point of view to the routine curriculum.

Parents, School and Community

The formal educational level of the parents is low. Most have had schooling through the eighth grade in local schools, some have had high school.

Many parents do not speak Tlingit.

The building of the new state-operated school appears to have been decided upon with little or no consultation with people of the community. The accounts given are vague and speculative, without too much interest--simply acceptance of the fact. This attitude seems to characterize generally the relationship of the community to the school. The people are interested in the school. They have opinions about various people at the school and reports they receive through the children but there appears to be only intermittent involvement with it. The Education Committee of the Alaska Native Sisterhood has served at various times in the capacity of a PTA leadership group. During the present school year, people report, there has not been much activity in relationship to the school.

The pattern of time allocation differs between village and school. The village men are in the main fishermen or seasonal workers in logging and cannery activities. The occupational time of school staff is the most regularized and scheduled within the community. The comments of members of the school staff or their families indicated that villagers are viewed as too independent or indifferent. The absence of a regular, observable schedule is looked upon as not being dependable or "wasting time" even though the same individuals are recognized as successful fishermen or described as capable in some area or other.

Trends, Problems

The activities of the Alaska Native Brotherhood and Sisterhood are likely to be a force for change in native education. It is of interest to note, also, that the president of the State Board of Education is from Angoon.

There is considerable support in the community for attendance by the children in BIA secondary schools, principally Mt. Edgecombe in Sitka and Chemawa Indian School in Oregon. It is felt that the children need the broader experience away from home and parents recognize they cannot afford private boarding in Juneau or Sitka for their high school age children.

The situation at Angoon suggests that the persistence of traditional concepts and practices along with the adoption of new concepts and practices, and the harmonizing of the two, may be a more precious vein of cultural relevance to be mined than reviving of esoteric native crafts and languages in minimal use. This is not to say that the latter should be rejected; these have their own values and they have significance for the universal human experience as being yet another precious instance of human diversity

and creativity. It would seem doubtful, however, that imitative reproductions by descendents or others can sustain the substance, beauty and quality of carving achieved within the period of human creative experience that brought it into being.

The Tlingit life of Angoon seems to indicate that there are less conspicuous cultural persistences that do bear upon the vital present now. Perhaps the school should be alert to the matter of what sustains the Tlingit self-image of worth. The concept that a Tlingit never dies, that Tlingit identity is continuing, supportive, and vital and sustains the person through change, and destructive confusion, is the cultural insight to be recognized, understood and valued. It is not impossible that the cultural pluralism sustained and expressed in the Angoon community has lessons for schools seeking to cope with demands upon them to find ways of teaching the young of a multi-cultural society.